DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 176 CS 210 597

AUTHOR Styne, Marlys M.
TITLE Poetry in English Composition, with Computers or without.
PUB DATE 13 Feb 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the City Colleges of Chicago Conference "Literature across the Disciplines: the Roles of Literature in the Community College" (Chicago, IL, October 17, 1986) and at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (22nd, Cedar Rapids, IA, February 12-14, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Computer Uses in Education; *Creative Writing; *English Curriculum; Literature; *Poetry; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students; Word Processing; *Writing Improvement; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Compupoem (Computer Program); Poetrywriter (Computer Program)

ABSTRACT

Community college English composition classes are ideal for expanding the circumference of poetry because (1) reading poetry broadens students' horizons and may lead to an interest in literature, (2) writing poetry helps students express themselves and skills acquired in poetry-writing may carry over into essay writing, (3) reading/writing poetry facilitates the study of vocabulary and connotation, and (4) students enjoy poetry if it is presented effectively. Certain poems, such as Karl Shapiro's "Auto Wreck" lend themselves particularly well to study by students who would not be moved by the works of the major poets. Students enjoy writing poetry as long as they know that their work will not be gauged by some impossible standard of excellence, and computer programs ("Compupoem" and "Poetrywriter" are two examples) can be a great help to them. A survey indicated that a number of community college instructors are skeptical about the possibility of interesting their students in poetry. One or two teachers even suggested that community college students lacked a certain sensitivity and therefore exposing them to poetry would be a waste of time. Others, however, believe that reading and writing poetry can increase word awareness, stimulate imagination, and help students become better writers in general. (Samples of students' poetry and 16 references are included.) (AEW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED283176

Marlys M. Styne
Professor of English
Wilbur Wright College
3400 N. Austin Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60634
(312) 794-3160

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

POETRY IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION,

WITH COMPUTERS OR WITHOUT

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marlys M. Styne

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at

(1) the City Colleges of Chicago conference "Literature Across the Disciplines: the Roles of Literature in the Community College," October 17, 1986.

(2) the twenty-second annual meeting of the Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College, Cedar Rapids, IA, February 13, 1987.

CS210597

Last fall I presented "Poems by Computer: Introducing Poetry in a High-tech Society" at the City Colleges of Chicago first national conference on "The Future of Literature in the Community College" and at the Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College. In that paper, I explored "computer poetry"--figure verse, poetry-generating programs, computer-assisted instruction in poetry and poetic terms, and interactive poetry writing programs. I emphasized the possibilities for using computers to encourage students to read and write poetry, especially through the use of Stephen Marcus' Compupoem, perhaps the best-known interactive poetry-writing program. I concluded that the computer does have value for introducing poetry in a high-tech society.

As I completed last year's paper, I was nearly overwhelmed by other, larger questions. My focus changed from computers to poetry. Is poetry alive and relevant today? What is poetry, anyway? Who is writing and/or reading poems? Should poetry be included in the English composition curriculum? If so, can computer programs help? Now I want to lead you through the process I followed in my non-scientific research on these questions, a meandering and still-incomplete process leading through poetry as perceived by the media toward a definition of poetry and a brief consideration of how it can be used in English composition classes.

As a non-poet with little recent exposure to poetry, teaching at a college where literature courses have almost disappeared, I thought poetry was dead or dying. Once inspired by the computer-poetry connection, I opened my eyes and discovered that I had been wrong. Poetry, if broadly defined, is everywhere. Only those who hold narrow, ivory tower views of poetry as great art seem to think that poetry is dead and/or irrelevant to ordinary citizens and community college students.

Chicago Tribune columnist Jon Margolis, in an article about politics rather than poetry, seems to represent the "poetry is dead" view. He wrote: "...with a few exceptions today's poets are self-centered wimps who write in language possibly, just possibly, understood by other self-centered wimps and a few English professors, which may be redundant." But Bob Greene, also in the Tribune, presented a different view, one which led me toward my definition of poetry.

From responses to an earlier article about the decline of poetry (he too apparently had assumed that poetry was dead), Greene discovered that ordinary people across the country are writing poems, "reaching into their hearts to express things that mean something to them." The poems sent to Greene were not necessarily "good" poems. "They're written a little awkwardly, and the rhythm is a little off, and the final effect is one of amateurishness." To Greene, this doesn't matter. The massive response from a poetry-writing public "goes

completely against the common theory of how Americans are in the '80's. Americans are supposed to be passive media consumers, sitting in front of their television sets soaking in whatever is fed to them." Instead, many people are writing poems, and writing poems makes them feel special (Greene).

What is poetry, anyway? It may be greeting card verse or song lyrics or Shakespearean sonnets, or...what? The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word "poem" as "a composition designed to convey a vivid and imaginative sense of experience, characterized by the use of condensed language chosen for its sound and suggestive power as well as its meaning, and by the use of such literary techniques as structured meter, natural cadences, rhyme, or metaphor." Having left my ivory tower, I have chosen to emphasize the first parts of the definition: the vivid sense of experience and the condensed language. I will over-simplify further, risking the wrath of the "real" poets, and define poetry as "self-expression through well-chosen words." Poetry, thus broadly defined, is everywhere, some great, most merely interesting.

The media have recently acknowledged poets and poetry in various ways both serious and humorous. The Chicago Tribune, on its May 14 editorial page, paid tribute to Emily Dickinson. This was a surprise, according to a later letter to the editor, "because one does not expect to stumble upon the great art of

poetry in a hard-boiled, two-fisted, big-city newspaper" (Bloyd).

Poetry has reached the comic strips as well: Elly, the harried housewife in "For Better or for Worse," shows her poems to a friend. From her "futility of housework phase" came this poem: "A tiny cry within the night,/ A mother's touch, a gentle light,/ A rocking chair, a cheek caressed,/ A baby to a bosom pressed,/ A bundle in a cot replaced,/ A mother's footsteps, soft, retraced--/ She whispers as the shadows creep.../ "Now, let me sleep! Please, let me sleep!!!" (Johnston).

According to the Tribune, poetry has even made its way into civic festivals: a "best zucchini poetry contest" was a highlight of the fifth annual International Zucchini Festival August 23 in Harrisville, New Hampshire (A Teeny Ode).

Poetry is surely alive in Chicago. In June, 1986, William Bolcom's three-hour orchestral song cycle, "Songs of Innocence and Experience," was presented in Grant Park. This setting of forty-six William Blake poems for orchestra, children's choir, madrigal and folk ensembles, vocal soloists, and rock singer was called by a critic "a Grant Park Triumph." "One of the most encouraging phenomena to emerge from the present pluralistic decade in American music is that, like the lion and the lamb, cultivated musical idioms and vernacular elements are beginning to lie down with one another again" (von Rhein). I

see a similar coming together of "cultivated" and "vernacular" poetry.

Poetry reigns elsewhere in the city. Chicago poetry is alive in the theatrical readings of performance poets at the Get Me High Lounge in Wicker Park, the Green Mill in Uptown, Link's Hall on North Sheffield, and elsewhere in Chicago (Sawyers, Barnidge). Also, Dial-A-Poem, sponsored by the Chicago Office of Fine Arts, lets callers listen to 2 1/2-minute poetry tapes, each tape played for two weeks. A reading by one of the City Colleges' own poets, Martha Vertreace, was scheduled for November 24 through December 8, 1986 (Chicago Lit).

There's further variety on the national poetry scene. James Cummins has published The Whole Truth, a book-length narrative poem written in sestinas, about a Perry Mason murder trial. According to reviewer Larry Kart, "If, The Whole Truth seems to ask, what we want from art is perfect formal order and perfectly good sense, not to mention some good clean fun--well, how about some gorgeous verbal fireworks?" (Kart).

On a more serious note, Judson Jerome, in the October, 1986 Writer's Digest, wrote about his coming anthology planned to "fairly represent the current state of our (American) poetry." More than 350 people submitted their lists of ten major living American poets. Many respondents agreed with Jerome that "...we happen not to have any major poets right

now--in the sense that Frost and Eliot were major poets. But we have an enormous number of good poets" (9).

The responses to Jerome's survey showed great diversity among the poets named. Conservative poetic forms and free verse, a variety of social, philosophical, religious, and other viewpoints, black and white and male and female poets from all sections of the country, were represented.

Respondents commented upon the many college and university poetry centers, departments, workshops, and classes in the writing of poetry, as well as the explosion of small presses and the huge volume of poetry being published today. "I should expect there are more people writing poetry today than there have been since classical days when every well-turned-out person was expected to be able to compose," wrote one of Jerome's readers (10). The quality of this avalanche of poetry was sometimes questioned: "If we have a hundred thousand poets, we have no poets at all". Still, Judson Jerome concludes, "I feel as though I have taken its pulse and found American poetry today in sound if not spectacular health....Let a thousand poets bloom!" (11).

Associate Editor John Wheatcroft introduced the Spring, 1986, issue of The CEA Critic, an issue devoted to twentieth-century poetry, with an essay entitled "About the Disappearance of the Poem." Wheatcroft wrote," I freely, if not cheerfully, concede it is possible for people to make poems

virtually disappear....They've done it in the simplest and easiest of ways: they ignore poems" (3). He blames the critics for making poems disappear. He suggests that "the exclusive exercise of cerebral functions may lead to the loss of the poem" (5).

Three critical theories may be at fault. Deconstruction, the offspring of logical positivism and analytical philosophy; ideological criticism, offspring of relativism and cultural anthropology; and pragmatism, offspring of instrumental philosophy and the psychology of self-awareness, says Wheatcroft, have made some poems disappear, at least temporarily. "These disciplined ways of analyzing, relating, and focusing on poetry ought not undermine our confidence in the existence of the poem....For as they solely deconstruct the poem or absorb the poem or turn the poem into a reflection of the reading self, they shortcircuit the reader and the practical critic--and the teacher and the student--out of the holistic process of experiencing the poem" (6).

"To be sure," says Wheatcroft," my own wish, fostered more by good will toward every human being than by zealous hope of converting and saving the world, is that the circumference of poetry be limitlessly expanded" (3).

What better place for expanding the circumference of poetry, without shortcircuiting the process of experiencing the poem, than in English composition classes? I surveyed the

Wright College English Department, twenty-two teachers (besides myself) who teach composition regularly, and found, as I had expected, that poetry assignments are rare. I discovered that three teachers include poetry in English 100, 101 and/or 102. They devote from two to six class periods to poetry. One teacher uses "Musee des Beaux Arts" by W.H. Auden and "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams in relation to a project to describe and interpret the Breughel painting "The Fall of Icarus." Another uses Marvel's "To His Coy Mistress" and Shakespeare's "That Time of Year..." for a comparison of tones. A third colleague uses a number of poems by Masefield, Houseman, Frost, Tennyson, Keats, Shapiro and others to teach summarizing, paraphrasing, figures of speech, and connotation.

A fourth teacher, a pessimist about community college teaching in general, has tried poetry and found that her students "don't have the sensitivity to language that would make them effective readers of poetry." She sees value in using poetry in composition, but only for better students than she has to teach.

Two other colleagues have observed my experiments with Poetrywriter, a poetry-generating program, (Roberts) and Compupoem (Marcus), and plan to introduce their students to some poetry in the microcomputer lab and the classroom as time permits. One of them believes that his English 100 students

can learn to imitate the vivid detail often used in poetry, and he hopes that the sentence patterns used in poetry will stretch the students' repertoires of sentence patterns.

There was general agreement among the six that some or all of my survey statements about poetry in composition are true: 1) Reading poetry broadens students' horizons and may lead to an interest in literature; 2) Writing poetry helps students express themselves, and skills acquired in poetry-writing may carry over into essay writing; 3) Reading and/or writing poetry is useful in the study of vocabulary and connotation; 4) Students enjoy reading and/or writing poetry if it's presented effectively.

Two respondents to my survey, and presumably most of the fourteen who did not respond, find poetry either irrelevant or impossible to teach to community college students.

What conclusions can I draw from this meandering research? Most important, any statement about poetry should be prefaced by a definition of poetry. If poetry means great art and major poets only, we risk boring our students and scaring them out of any poetic urges. If we want to "expand the circumference of poetry," as John Wheatcroft suggests, we must define it broadly as something like "self-expression through well-chosen words," limited as that definition is. Still, we don't have to settle for the mediocre. Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," a favorite of my students, illustrates how much meaning a few words can

convey. Karl Shapiro's "Auto Wreck" presents a subject students can relate to, and they are interested enough in the poem to consult their dictionaries and think about the connotations which give the poem its meanings.

What about writing poetry? I have found that students enjoy trying, as long as I don't hold up some impossible standard of excellence. That's where computers come in. In my "Chicago Portraits from Compupoem" (see the last pages of this paper), you will see what students can do with the help of a computer program. There's not a "great" poem there, and yet you can see minds at work.

I believe that poetry is alive: Emily Dickinson in the Tribune, William Blake in the Grant Park Concerts, a variety of poets in little magazines, performance poets in Chicago's cafes and clubs, poets presenting their works via telephone. I believe that reading and writing poems can increase word awareness, stimulate thought and imagination, and help students become better writers in general. I believe that computers can provide special incentives for relectant poets and readers of poetry, and I invite you to read my "Poems by Computer" paper to explore that area further (Styne). Yes, I sincerely believe that poetry, with or without computers, belongs in English composition.

Works Cited

Barnidge, Mary Shen. "Chicago Fun Times: Poetry as a Spectator Sport." Reader 29 Aug. 1986, sec. 1: 7.

Bloyd, George. "Emily Dickinson Editorial was both Surprising and Inspiring." Letter. Chicago Tribune May 1986.

"Chicago Lit: Poets Read their Works on 'Dial-A-Poem.'" Chicago Sun-Times 17 Aug. 1986, Show sec.: 31.

Greene, Bob. "Readers Wax Poetic about Creative Spirit." Chicago Tribune 10 Feb. 1986, sec. 5: 1.

Jerome, Judson. "Poetry: Major Questions." Writer's Digest Oct. 1986: 8-11.

Johnston, Lynn. "For Better or for Worse." Comic strip. Chicago Tribune 26-27 May 1986, sec. 5: 9.

Kart, Larry. "A Poem Goes Pop." Rev. of The Whole Truth, by James Cummins. Chicago Tribune 11 June 1986, sec. 5: 3.

Marcus, Stephen. Compupoem. Computer software. Apple version sold by the author. Adapted for IBM by Marlys Styne.

Margolis, Jon. "Perchance he doth Poetize too Much." Chicago Tribune 10 Feb. 1986.

"Poem." American Heritage Dictionary. 2nd College Edition. 1982.

Roberts, Don. Poetrywriter. Computer software. In 222 Basic Computer Programs for Home, School, & Office. Woodsboro, MD: ARCsoft, 1984. 44-47.

Sawyers, June. "Poetry in Chicago: The New Wave." Chicago Tribune 20 Aug. 1986, sec. 7: 5-6.

Styne, Marlys M. "Poems by Computer: Introducing Poetry in a High-Tech Society." Proceedings: The Future of Literature in the Community College. First National Conference 18-19 Oct. 1985. Chicago: City Colleges of Chicago, 1986. 135-163. ERIC Document Reproduction Service: ED 273 964.

"A Teeny Ode to a Zucchini!" Chicago Tribune, 15-17 Aug., USA Weekend sec.: 22.

von Rhein, John. "Bolcom's Ambitious Song Cycle a Grant Park Triumph." Chicago Tribune 29 June 1986.

Wheatcroft, John. "About the Disappearance of the Poem." CEA Critic 48.3 (1986): 2-8.

Chicago Portraits from Compupoem

THE COMPUTER
POWERFUL, COMPETENT
ON THE POET'S DESK
ITS CURSOR FLASHING, PATIENTLY
AWAITS A HUMAN PARTNER.

Compupoem is a computer program developed by Stephen Marcus of the University of California, Santa Barbara. The program encourages the reluctant poet to choose a noun, two adjectives, a prepositional phrase, a verb, and two adverbs; add a few more words; and write a short poem.

In October and November, 1985, Wright College students and faculty were inspired by Compupoem and the IBM Personal Computer to create a series of portraits which represent Chicago in all its variety:

From the students of English 101:

THE LAKE
GLASS-LIKE, CALM
IN THE EARLY MORNING
BEAUTIFULLY, SOLEMNLY
SPARKLES.

...by Jeanine Jurasz

TEACHERS
DEDICATED, CARING
IN THE CLASSROOM
QUICKLY, UNKNOWINGLY
LEARN.

...by Debi Gajewski

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST
TRANSPARENT, LIQUID
SHOPS AT JEWEL ON A SATURDAY NIGHT
WISTFULLY, ACCORDINGLY
WEEPS.

...by Glen Lind

THE CAT
BLACK, WICKED
MIDNIGHT IN AN ALLEY
POMPOUSLY, HEDONISTICALLY
WALKS.

...by Michael Killingbeck

NEGROES
GENTLE, OPPRESSED
WITHOUT MARTIN'S WISDOM
INNOCENTLY, FRUITLESSLY
HOPING.

...by David Macapagal

GANGSTER
RUTHLESS, EVIL
AT THE SEEDY BAR
CUNNINGLY, STUPIDLY
HIDING.

...by Michelle Hodal

GIRLS
YOUNG, BEAUTIFUL
IN THE CITY
SEXILY, SULTRILY
MOVE.

...by Jody Switzer

A DOG
DIRTY, FILTHY
IN A YARD
HAPPILY, SPONTANEOUSLY
DIGS.

...by Luis Gutierrez

THE I.R.S.
LISTENER, LOOKER
ON APRIL 15TH
HEARTLESSLY, ACCURATELY
GRABS.

...by Hayward Johnson

BUSINESSMEN
GREEDY, FAT
IN AN OFFICE
MISERLY, CRIMINALLY
SITTING.

...by Vahe Mekhitarian

PRIEST
DEDICATED, RESERVED
INSIDE THE CHURCH
SINCERELY, DEVOUTLY
PRAYING.

...by Joseph Rockaitis

THE FETUS
UNKNOWN, UNBORN
IN A LONELY WOMB
UNKNOWINGLY, NEEDLESSLY
DIES.

...by Anne Pfeffer

MY SHANGRI-LA
TRANQUIL, PICTURESQUE
BENEATH A SUMMER MOON
SEDUCTIVELY, YEARNINGLY
BECKONS.

...by John O'Hara

From the faculty:

A CHILD
ENERGETIC, INQUISITIVE
INTO A WORLD OF ADULTS
ENTHUSIASTICALLY, IMPATIENTLY
EXPLORING.

...By Judy Hanley
English Department

THE APPLE
SCARLET, GOLDEN
IN THE TORRENTIAL RAIN
QUICKLY, HEEDLESSLY
PLUMMETS.

...by Kathleen Galway
Data Processing Department

THE GRAY-BEARDED OLD MAN
STOOPED, WEARY
ON THE BROKEN PARK BENCH
IN HIS OWN WORLD, SADLY
SLOUCHES TOWARD OBLIVION.

...by Marlys Styne
English Department

Published (in part) in Thalassa, the Wright College literary magazine, Spring, 1986; published in ACE Newsletter, Volume 2, Number 1, 1986 (NCTE Assembly on Computers in English).